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LGBTQ Mental Health

By Jodi O'Brien

I recently attended an event for LGBTQ student leaders. Gazing around the packed high-school auditorium at the rainbow of faces gathered to hear a keynote on leadership and intersectionality, I found myself tearing up. In my day, many of these young people would likely have been spending time in psychiatric facilities or similar programs designed to, if not “cure,” at least curb and closet their gender and sexual non-conforming expressions. Three decades later, here was this spirited group publically convened to discuss how best to lead an increasingly visible LGBTQ youth population.

After years of denial and erasure, popular media representations of LGBTQ lives now abound. Gender and sexually non-conforming youth can find reflections of themselves and their experiences across a vast range of social forums. While this might be cause for optimism among those of us who value diverse lives and wish to see an end to the exclusionary and injurious hatred that LGBTQ people suffer, mental health statistics suggest a more complicated story. In the past decade, suicide has replaced homicide as the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15-24 (accidents are the leading cause). LGBTQ youth are three to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Mental health experts note that

these alarming rates are only the tip of the iceberg: suicidal ideation is the surface expression of a submerged glacier of extreme fear, distress, anxiety, isolation, low self-worth, self-harm, substance abuse, body-image issues, and relationship violence. Despite popular culture and a political environment of heightened LGBTQ awareness – a *zeitgeist* of “it gets better” – for many LGBTQ youth everyday life is fraught with experiences that threaten their social, psychological, and physical well-being.

While LGBTQ youth are at greater risk than their straight peers in most areas of mental health trauma, as a group, they are disproportionately emerging as some of the most innovative, inclusive, and effective leaders in new social justice movements. As educators in Jesuit Catholic colleges and universities, how do we engage with the pain and suffering, as well as the promising potential, of LGBTQ students in ways that move beyond tolerance to a full expression of *cura personalis*? How do we avoid the tendency to victimize and pathologize these students and, instead, attend to enhancing their full personhood? A first step is recognizing the complexity of contemporary LGBTQ youth experience; a related step is cultivating an educational atmosphere of

thriving inclusion – an environment in which LGBTQ students (and I would extend this to staff and faculty) experience opportunities for genuine belonging. Such an environment reflects a deeply considered understanding of the perpetual prejudice that we face as gender and sexual minorities, as well as an appreciation for the unceasingly creative ways in which we forge ourselves in the liminalities of the spaces from which we have been historically erased, rejected, or caricatured.

Why are LGBTQ youth at such high risk? This group shares with other minoritized groups what psychologists call minority stress syndrome. Everyday circumstances in which a person is not only made to feel different, but must relentlessly gauge and navigate safety, the right to expression, and the necessity of making others comfortable in their presence is exhausting. The effects of this emotional labor on well-being are exacerbated in environments in which the minoritized person is isolated from others who share their perspectives and experiences. Depending on the socio-cultural demographics of a setting, many people and groups experience this (for example, persons of color in predominantly white spaces). In such situations, the healthy person calibrates a resilient sense of self by



psychologically referencing their place of belonging in the groups with which they identify. In other words, despite exclusion from dominant groups, they experience a sense of interior home through family and community.

Additional psychic distress occurs when the minoritized person is excluded from family and community. Family and faith communities are among the most significant sources of psychological resilience and/or trauma. Acceptance through family and faith establishes a sense of belonging that serves as the foundation for well-being and healing in the midst of external marginalization and violence. Rejection by family and faith casts the minoritized person adrift, leaving them at

much greater risk of injury and trauma. Rejection from family and faith is a typical experience for LGBTQ youth, especially those from religious backgrounds. When gender and sexually non-conforming religious youth are exiled from family and church – often the only home they know – and they must also wrestle with the implications of being spun off from their faith-based system of meaning. Parents and religious leaders are often the most significant source of self and social understanding for young people. The message that there is no place for them in this constellation of family and community – other than through self-erasure and/or a cloak of shame – is devastating for LGBTQ youth.

The anguish of this struggle for self-understanding may actually be complicated by heightened visibility in popular culture and social media. Enhanced representation of LGBTQ lives and experiences does not necessarily alleviate the confusion and distress of gender and sexually non-conforming youth; in the search for meaning and belonging, the gulf between the family and church that are rejecting you and the lifestyle offered in commercially driven media may seem impossible to navigate. As a result, LGBTQ youth are at considerable risk of intra- and inter-psychological drowning as they try to steer their way through these currents of exclusion.

The good news is that higher educational environments often serve as a raft of safety for LGBTQ youth as well as potential maps for reconciliation with family and faith. In the best of circumstances, college life offers an opportunity to develop a sense of self and community that mitigates some of the unsettling consequences of stigma and rejection. Supportive educational environments offer students opportunities to recover from trauma and to develop self-understanding and forms of communication that enable them to reach back effectively into the communities that have rejected them. Jesuit Catholic university education is especially well-suited to providing LGBTQ students with experiences of community-supported healing and, most importantly, the tools for forging bridges back to family and faith. Factors that contribute to this include opportunities to learn about LGBTQ histories, cultures, and experiences. Faculty and staff mentors with sufficient expertise, rather than just those who are well-intentioned, are key role models whose own experiences offer signposts of hope and maps of healthy lives. Through engagement with these mentors and participation in LGBTQ-centered courses, clubs, and co-curricular activities, students encounter knowledge and stories that help them to author their own sense of being and belonging along lines that offer hopeful possibilities for reconciliation with family and faith. Tools for self-discovery and self-determi-

nation that include compassionate reflections on family and faith are key components not only for robust mental health, but for establishing a bright moral compass by which to navigate the often overwhelming waves of popular culture.

Extensive evidence gathered through the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State indicates that family acceptance of LGBTQ members results in significantly higher happiness, resilience in the face of adversity and discrimination, healthy relationships, and robust engagement in family, community, career, and faith. Many LGBTQ youth reconcile family and faith through their college experiences. As they find their course through the tides of exile, stigma, and discrimination, many of these students are forging voices of leadership that promise new directions through some of the troubling concerns for their generation. For instance, the group of LGBTQ youth leaders gathered in the high-school auditorium were there to discuss ways to combat the “myth of hook up culture.” Popular culture has made much of the “hook up” culture of casual sex that young people are supposedly caught up in. Armed with solid research, these LGBTQ leaders were pointing out that sexual activity among youth has been declining steadily in recent years. Further, the so-called hook up culture appeals only to a very small segment of college students, with many students preferring to opt out. They wanted to get the word out to young peo-

ple who, with only popular culture as their guide, might be suffering in shame and silence thinking that they are abnormal in their desire not to engage in casual sex. For these student leaders, this message was especially important for gender and sexually non-conforming youth who already have enough misinformation to manage about themselves and their lives.

I was encouraged and moved by the compassionate and intelligent way in which these LGBTQ leaders were elevating the conversation about healthy sexual choices and relationships to new levels. In providing community and tools for family and faith reconciliation, Jesuit Catholic colleges and universities can contribute significantly to advancing the positive mental health and reducing the risk of injury and depression among LGBTQ youth. We also have much to learn from these LGBTQ youth leaders about finding our way through the pain, confusion, and anger of rejection and exclusion to a place of generous engagement and genuine inclusion.

Jodi O'Brien is a professor of sociology at Seattle University; her academic interests include gender and sexuality, religion, and social inequalities and social psychology.

Resources:

<https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org>
 Wade, Lisa. 2018. *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*. Norton